(a) whether the Foreign Minister of Israel visited India a few months ago and offered his country's help to India in combating terrorism in this country;

(b) if so, what type of assistance was offered and the reaction of the Government of India in the matter;

(c) whether the Government of India has taken into consideration the possible fall out of Israel's offer from the Arab nations, particularly the P.L.O.; and

(d) what other issues were discussed between the representatives of two Governments during the said visit and the reaction of the Government of India in each case?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI SALMAN KHURSHEED): (a) No, Sir. The Foreign Minister of Israel, during his visit to India from May 17 to 19, 1993 did not proffer any proposal to help India combat terrorism. Nor was any such matter discussed.

(b) and (c) Do not arise.

(d) Possibilities of bilateral co-operation in areas like agriculture, water management, solar energy, trade, tourism, and culture were discussed. The Government of India favourably reacted to the possibilities of a mutually beneficial co-operation between the two countries in these areas. Views were also exchanged on regional and international issues, in particular, the prospects for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

Cherrapunji A Wet Desert

*305. SHRIMATI CHANDRIKA ABHINANDAN JAIN: Will the Minister of ENVIRONMENT AND FOREST be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are aware of the fact that Cherrapunji in Assam, once the wettest place on earth, has now been reduced to a wet desert;

(b) if so, the reasons which lead to this situation; and

(c) the steps Government have taken or propose to take to bring back the place to lush green hills?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI KAMAL NATH): (a) and (b) The Ministry is aware of the fact that the areas in and around Cherrapunji, which receive very high rainfall, are highly degraded with very low water retention capacity. Much of the area is highly exposed and the precipitation received during the monsoon mostly drains away as run off there being very little infiltration in the ground. The areas in an around Cherrapunji are under the control of Autonomous District Council or private individuals. There are no Forest areas under the control of the State Forest Department around this region.

It has been indicated by the State Government of Meghalaya that forest areas controlled by the District Councils & individuals have been subjected to unscientific, unregulated and heavy deforestation, besides extensive shifting cultivation. In the case of Cherrapunji, the degradation has been further aggravated because of very steep topography of the locality as well as heavy rains (1000—1500 cm. per annum) which the region receives. This has resulted in accelerated loss of soil cover, thereby impairing the regenerative capacity and productivity of the area.

(c) In view of the fact that the area in question has difficult terrain and shallow soil depth, taking up planting activities is an uphill task. However, the Social Forestry Wing of the Forest Department of Meghalaya has taken steps to provide green cover over the barran lands and to improve the degraded scrub forests in this area. The District Council has also been involved in the activity of afforestation by way of providing technical manpower on deputation and by extending grants-in-aid for raising, maintenance and protection of forests.

Konkan Railway Project

*306. SHRI B. K. HARIPRASAD: Will the Minister of RAILWAYS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the work on Konkan Railway Project has come to a standstill because of resistance from vested interests calling for realignment of the originally planned routes;

(b) whether such issues were not sorted out at the commencement of the project and the reasons due to which Government is permitting such disruptive forces to stall the project at this advanced stage of construction; and

(c) whether Government have taken note of the contention of the Konkan Railway Corporation that any further delay in continuance of the work would entail cost and time over-runs and may even force the Konkan Railway Project to wind up its operations; if so, what is Government's reaction thereto?

THE MINISTER OF RAILWAYS (SHRI C. K. JAFFER SHARIEF): (a) and (b) The work is continuing on the project except on a 55 kms. stretch between Mayem and Balli in Goa State which has been stopped temporarily as an alternate route in that portion was suggested by 'NATPAK', a firm of consultants, claimed to be cheaper by Rs. 80 crores than the existing alignment. The matter has been referred to a High Level Committee under the retired Supreme Court Judge, Mr. Justice G. J. Oza. The Committee is expected to submit its report by 10-9-1993. The decision regarding alignment to be followed will be taken shortly thereafter and work will then be resumed.

All the issues in regard to the alignment were sorted out and settled at the commencement of the project.

(c) The Konkan Railway Corporation has intimated that the delay in resuming the work will entail cost and time over-runs. However, there is no proposal for winding up the operation of Konkan Railway Corporation.

Disappearance of Explosive Material from Gomia, Bihar

@*307. SHRI K. K. VEERAPPAN:
SHRI V. GOPALSAMY:

Will the Minister of HOME AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that 500 kg. highly volatile explosive material while being transported from Gomia in Bihar to Assam has disappeared from a highly guarded railway coach;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether any enquiry has been ordered and any employee suspended or arrested, if so, the details thereof;

(d) whether any recovery of the missing explosives has been made; if so, the details thereof; and

(e) what steps are being taken to prevent such incidents in future?

THE MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS (SHRI S. B. CHAVAN): (a) to (d) 250 kilograms of explosives contained in 10 cases out of a consignment of 360 cases, despatched from Gomia, Bihar, and meant for the Border Roads Organisation in Assam are reported missing. The incident is reported to have occurred in October, 1992, when the consignment was sent by rail from Gomia to Assam via West Bengal. Further details of the status in this regard are being ascertained.

(e) Detailed instructions have been sent to all States from time to time to exercise strict watch and vigilance regarding safety, security and transportation of explosives. The Government of India were have expressed concern to State Govts. about theft of explosives. The paramount importance of taking immediate steps to plug various loopholes in the existing arrangements and to ensure better safety and security in manufacture transportation, storage and use of explosives has been highlighted for taking necessary action on a priority basis. State Govts. have also been asked to take effective measures for recovery of explosives which might be available with anti-social and criminal elements.

Customs Duty Exemption for Importing Medical Equipments

@@*308. SHRI RAJUBHAI A. PARMAR:
SHRI RAMSINH RATHWA:

Will the Minister of HEALTH AND FAMILY WELFARE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that hospitals treating poor patients free, get Customs duty exemption to import essential medical equipment and if so, details thereof and of the import exemption procedures in this respect;

(b) what are the names of hospitals whose applications for exemption from Customs duty made since January 1, 1993, are pending till today, and what are the reasons for withholding their applications and what is the nature of equipment sought to be imported by each hospital; and

(c) what are the names of hospitals whose applications have been accepted since January 1, 1993 and the details of equipment given exemption in each case?

THE MINISTER OF HEALTH AND FAMILY WELFARE (SHRI B. SHANKARANAND): (a) Customs Duty exemption on import of medical equipment is allowed subject to the fulfilment of conditions laid down in the Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance

@Previously Starred Question 147, transferred from 5th August, 1993.

@@Previously Starred Question 207, transferred from 10th August, 1993.